Semper Reformanda
Mark 2:13-22
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota, Florida
October 25, 2015

498 years ago this week an Augustinian Monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed a document to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He was a professor of theology and he wanted to discuss some ideas he had about doctrine and church governance. The big wooden church door served as a kind of community bulletin board in 1517. Luther's invitation to debate was in the form of 95 Theses, or propositions.

Those ideas are important: that we are saved by grace and not by works: that instead of trying to earn one's way into heaven Christians should respond with profound gratitude to God for the grace already given them. Today I want to focus on the enormous impact those ideas had and the movement they inspired which, in fact, changed not only Christian history but the history of Western Europe and, ultimately the whole world.

"Semper Reformanda" Luther said: "always reforming". So when we think about the Reformation we need to be reminded that it is not a singular, one time event that happened five centuries ago, but a process that is ongoing, very much happening now, in our time, and not only in the church but in the social, economic and political structures within which you and I live and move and have our being.

Reformation Sunday used to be the occasion when all good Protestants lustily sang Martin Luther's great hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, the preacher bashed the pope and trotted out all the reasons we are grateful we are not Catholic. Many of us grew up in a climate of interfaith wariness that bordered on hostility. Why-Catholics didn't believe we Protestants were even Christians, that our church is not a real church and we pretty much thought the same things about them. We thought they worshipped idols, what with all their statues, went to Mass in a language nobody understood, and we never did understand exactly why they didn't eat fish on Friday. We wondered if crossing yourself at the free throw line really helped and in my home a post script was my Dad's fervent hope that someone would beat the Notre Dame football team on Saturday, preferably someone with a name like Southern Methodist University.

Garrison Keillor, in his book Life Among the Lutherans, a collection of his Prairie Home Companion monologues, says that for the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon "intolerance toward Catholics was

part of the faith. We weren't sure what it was Catholics believed but whatever it was, it wasn't right." (P. 170)

I had first hand experience with that in the alley behind our house where the neighborhood kids everyday played whatever sport was in season. We lived between the Esteps, a big family of fundamentalist Baptists, and on the other side the Shaughnesees, an even bigger Catholic family whose oldest daughter was a Nun, Sister Hilda, who used to step off the bus and sweep up the street in her mysterious black robes. Every now and then a religious argument would break out in the alley right in the middle of an intense football game and the only thing the Baptist Esteps and the Catholic Shaughnesees ever agreed on was that the Presbyterian Buchanans were going straight to hell.

All of that is gone, thanks be to God. One of our daughters-in-law is a good Roman Catholic and she and our son are living out a new and delightful, if time consuming, reality. If you asked my three granddaughters if they are Catholic or Protestant they would answer "Yes...we're both, actually." They were baptized in a Presbyterian Church and had their First Communions in St Matthias Catholic Church. Their priest, Father John, invited me to participate in their First Communion masses and to preach, which I did. The oldest, Kate, just began Confirmation Class at Fourth Presbyterian and when I asked he about Conformation at her other church she said, "Oh that's next year. I'll go to that too."

So we are in a new and healthier place. A prominent Protestant theologian said that finally, after five centuries, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters can acknowledge the necessity of the Reformation, and we Protestants can acknowledge the tragedy of it.

"Semper Reformanda." It's in our DNA and it began one day long ago when Jesus sat down for dinner in the home of a man named Levi. It's early in the story. A young Rabbi from Nazareth, beginning in his home Synagogue, has begun to preach and teach in the rural villages of Galilee, announcing that the Kingdom of God has come and with it a whole new way of being faithful to God. Wherever he goes people are paying attention: crowds are gathering. He is saying some new and winsome things: that loving neighbors, caring for the sick and the poor, accepting and welcoming people who are generally outsiders- people with leprosy, sinners, prostitutes - is more important to God than all their religious customs, traditions and rules. He takes his own religion seriously. In fact he loves it so much he wants to make it better, to reform it, to make it what it's supposed to be. But to those who are invested in the status quo, he sounds for all the world like a trouble maker, maybe even subversive, particularly that day

when he sat down at Levi's table for dinner.

The problem with sitting down with Levi is that he is a tax collector. Everybody hates the tax man. It that day, the tax collector was a Jew hired by the Romans to collect their hated taxes. He was allowed to set the rates himself, to charge whatever he could get away with and skim the profits off the top for himself. It was a very lucrative profession. The downside was that everybody hated you, regarded you as a traitor for collaborating with and profiting from the hated Roman occupation. It was so bad that "Tax collectors and sinners" is almost one word in the New Testament. Sinners are people, mostly poor, who are too busy trying to survive to have time for the rules, regulations and rituals of religion. "Sinners" includes beggars, petty thieves, riff raff, prostitutes, all of them considered "Unclean", not the kind a respectable person would want to be seen with.

One day Jesus invited Levi, the tax collector, to come along and follow. And, for whatever reason, that is what Levi did: stood up from his counting table, walked away from his lucrative profession and followed Jesus. He was so happy, so overwhelmed that someone had not despised him, looked him in the eye, called him by name, and respected him that the first thing he did was go home and plan a dinner party to celebrate. And who does this man everyone detested and wouldn't be seen dead with invite to his party? He invites the only people who would attend, the only friends he has, all those who don't mind being seen with him, other tax collectors, pan handlers, prostitutes and his new friend the young Rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus. It must have been quite a party: loud, boisterous, with gales of hilarity and laughter and not much by way of proper table manners, not to mention pretty much ignoring all the religious customs and regulations and rules. (See Eujoo Mary Kim, Feasting on the Word, year B, Volume 1)

They're having such a great time in there - after all, it's not everyday that they get invited to anything. They're making so much noise that passers by notice, peer into the courtyard to see what is going on, and there is Jesus with a few of his disciples, right in the middle of that motley crowd, apparently having a great time himself. Religious leaders, Scribes, are scandalized and ask his disciples, "Why is he doing this? Why is he so disrespecting our customs and traditions? He knows the proper way to eat and what to eat and who to eat with and who not to eat with. He knows how important it is to keep yourself pure. All you people seem to care about is having a good time."

Jesus overhears. Gets up from the low table where he has been

reclining, steps outside to confront them.

"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak - the patch will pull away - and a worse tear is made no one puts new wine into old skins - the new wine will burst the skins and both the women and the skins are lost. One puts new wine into new wineskins."

It doesn't get any clearer than that. Religion - certainly not alone - creates institutions and customs and traditions and standards and rules and regulations - all designed to express and bear witness to the original, founding inspiration. God is love and wants all creation to live in that love, for instance. And in religion, certainly not alone, sometimes the customs and traditions and rules and the institution itself, its protection and preservation, overshadow the original inspiration. No human endeavor is immune. Consider Volkswagen, for instance, founded to provide economic and efficient transportation to the people, the "Volk", it's pursuit of institutional prowess and profit for shareholders and the preservation of the corporation itself overwhelmed its car making genius, it's vision and purpose and a highly respected institution was caught deceiving both its customers and the United States government, not to mention significantly adding to the carbon dioxide content of the air we breathe.

Thomas Jefferson thought the dynamic was so inevitable that there ought to be a revolution every generation or so.

There is, in fact, something like that going on at the moment within religion. Pope Francis has everyone upset including the hierarchy of his own church by reminding us of what Jesus was like and what he said and did. Was there ever a more powerful - and delightful - metaphor than the pomp and circumstance of an official White House welcome, with Marine Corps Herald Trumpets, flags fluttering in the morning breeze, rows of dignitaries waiting his arrival, a long line of limousines and black SUVs, and finally, the guest of honor arrives, emerging from a small Fiat?

Semper Reformanda. It's in our DNA. Francis of Assisi in the 13 the century, Luther and John Calvin in the 16th, Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 20th - living reminders of how institutional survival can overshadow founding inspiration.

The late Phyllis Tickle wrote a fascinations book, The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why. She observed that every 500 years the institutional church has a giant rummage sale. She traces the dynamic all the way back to ancient Israel into the Common Era: Jesus and the growth of the church...the Fall of Rome and emergence of the papacy... The split between the Eastern

and Western Churches...the Protestant Reformation which we remember today, every 500 years, a huge rummage sale.

Two things happen. A new, revitalized form of Christianity emerges and the older structure not only doesn't fade away but reforms itself and becomes stronger and more vital. And each time the Christian Faith spreads and expands dramatically. Phyllis Tickle argues that we are in the midst of a huge ecclesiastical rummage sale at the moment. Something big is happening. We can't quite see it all yet. Older forms are shaking - the Mainline Protestant churches are declining numerically. The Roman Catholic church is running out of priests and nuns.

So what is a church like this one and the one I served for 26 years, and the ones before that, and good Presbyterian people like you and me, supposed to do? I have an idea - and it is not to dig in and fight to the last breath to preserve the structures and traditions that have nurtured us and we have come to love. Church Historian Martin Marty once quipped that the last seven words of the institutional church will surely be "But we never did it that way before"!

I think our mission is to hold tightly to everything that reflects our original inspiration, our founding vision: the unconditional love of God, the Amazing Grace of Jesus Christ, Christ's call to live out that love in the world, as a church and as individuals, - and to live loosely with all the rest.

I don't know what's ahead. But I do know that whether it is we don't have to be afraid of it, and distrust it because it is unfamiliar, and we certainly shouldn't waste our time and resources fighting about it. The agenda for the church of the future, the church that is emerging, is what it has always been: to rejoice in the miracle of creation, to love this world as deeply and profoundly as our Lord loved it, to work for justice and peace in the world and to stand with those he stood with- the poor and oppressed, to announce to the world in our words but, more importantly, in our life together, the Good News of the Gospel that in Jesus Christ the Creator of all that is has drawn near, has been born, lived and died as one of us, and rose again from his grave to show us that nothing in all of creation, not even death, can separate us from God's love.

I do not know what the church of the future, the church my grandchildren and their children will inherit and, in their time, love and serve, will look like. But I think there is a hint of it, a still grainy picture of what the Holy Spirit is stirring up again in our age, in that dinner party at Levi's house two thousand years ago: a religion and a

church based not so much on getting all its beliefs and rules and policies right, it's theology perfectly orthodox, as it is in getting Jesus right, when he sat down for dinner at a tax collector's table, for instance. I do not know what it will look like but I think it will be a church not obsessed with keeping itself pure and uncontaminated by keeping sinners out, away from the Table - it's Sacraments and Rites reserved for members only, it's leadership only for the morally pure. I think it will be a church that will resemble its Lord sitting down at table with precisely those people his religion called unclean, unfit.

I think the church that is emerging from the Rummage Sale will have something to do with those three little granddaughters of mine who don't know whether they are Catholic or Protestant and don't seem to much care.

I think the church that is emerging will be as shockingly inclusive as Jesus was that day long ago, a church that will live it's life intentionally in the world as he did, it's doors, it's precious sacraments and traditions, open as wide as his arms were when he died on the cross, it's resources as invested in serving the world as his resources of love and passion and life and blood that he poured out on the cross.

I think the church that is emerging will be as grateful and joyful and confident as his first followers were after the reality of the Resurrection sank in because, after that there is nothing in this world to be afraid of, certainly not whatever is coming in the future.

Semper Reformanda...Always Reforming.

Thanks be to God.